

they had discovered principles of political right which were universally applicable—and which in time might be applied beyond politics to the sphere of morals. Burke in contrast was guided by a kind of certainty in (traditional) morals, while he viewed with the deepest skepticism speculative theories of political right. Thus, it may be said that whereas the Enlightenment “builds down” from the certainty of politics to doubtful questions of morals, the conservative “builds up” from the certainty of morals to doubtful questions of politics. Epistemic modesty is not an exclusively conservative principle, but epistemic modesty with respect to claims of political right may be. In any event, a universal *principle* of epistemic modesty would itself be a kind of grand theory, thus violating the strictures of epistemic modesty.

Finally, it must be observed that the combination of “historical utilitarianism,”

“epistemic modesty,” and a positional interpretation of conservatism leaves Muller’s conservatism vulnerable to the charge of historicism or relativism. It is no small irony that Kirk is so often accused of historicism when in fact he insists on the priority of a transcendent moral order, but then by insisting on transcendence is accused of an “orthodoxy” which is not truly conservatism.

Conservatism remains a rebuke to modernity, proclaiming again and again that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of” in the reductive philosophy of the Enlightenment. In its active cultivation of piety, conservatism keeps alive a dimension of the human good which no “progress” can render permanently inaccessible. Precisely in refusing to make its peace with the modern age, conservatism will retain its voice even when modernity shall at last have been overcome.

Good Sense, Conservatism, and Faith

James Kalb

IS RELIGIOUS FAITH necessary for conservatism? A more basic question is whether it is necessary for good sense, since it is for the sake of good sense that we are conservative. If it were otherwise, conservatism would be a hobby or an ideology, and it is neither; it is simply the appearance good sense takes on in an overly-

rationalistic world.

Conservatism begins with the acceptance of limits. It tells us that not everything can be said, let alone proved; that we did not make the world and cannot remake it; that we are creatures of habit; and that loyalty to the ways and understandings that order a particular social world is necessary for our lives to be coherent and reasonable. As Joseph de Maistre points out, we are not simply

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men; we are Frenchmen or Italians, Europeans or Americans, Yankees or Southerners, Protestants, Catholics, or Jews.

Acceptance of limits is thus part of conservatism, as well as good sense, but it is not the whole. Conservatism is not a dogma and conservatism cannot be purely conservative. We recognize limits by reference to what goes beyond them, so to know them we must also know something about the unlimited. To accept that we cannot remake the world is to accept that much of it forever exceeds our grasp. If we do not have some sense of what it is that exceeds us, however, the matter becomes too abstract to seem relevant. Religious faith gives us the sense of the transcendent that we need, and conservatism cannot do without it. It is the absence of that sense that turned acceptance of particular loyalties into the right-wing extremist ideologies of the last century.

Nor can good sense do without religious faith. Good sense is dealing with our situation as a whole in a fitting way. It is elusive, because we cannot understand everything about our situation. We must act, but self-sufficient certainty is out of reach. Simply accepting things as they are denies that there is anything important beyond what is before us here and now. It means the end of all standards by which things could be judged. To believe that we can demonstrate how things should be, however, ignores the importance of what we cannot pin down.

Since we can neither simply rest content with what there is nor demonstrate what is better, we must rely on faith. Faith is our connection to what exceeds the limits of thought; as Saint Paul says, it is "the evidence of things not seen." While we cannot comprehend faith, we need it to comprehend anything. Our thought must rely on it, simply because thought has objects outside itself and cannot be self-contained.

By its nature, the connection between

thought and faith cannot be altogether clear to us. It requires, however, that faith be somehow brought into relation with experience and reason. Without a settled balance among the three, thought becomes disordered in all its aspects: experience becomes blind, faith erratic, and reason unreasonable.

It is hard to explain things that are so fundamental to human life, although we must do our best so that we can defend them when they are challenged. Where we cannot explain, practice must be our guide. Hence the importance of cultural loyalty; it is less theory than a concrete way of life that brings things as diverse as experience, faith and reason into a stable and productive relationship.

For such a relationship to exist the way of life must be informed by a good that transcends it but is nonetheless concrete and shared. If we are not inspired by a transcendent good we act without faith and blindly; if the good is not concrete, our experience of it cannot guide us effectively; and if it is not shared, it cannot help us live with others in accordance with reason.

We must therefore accept transcendent good in concrete social form—that is, religion. To do so is simply to recognize what we always do of necessity. We cannot dispense with either the social world around us or goods that transcend it, so we inevitably trust that something in that world points to goods beyond it. We can view that trust as justified only through the religious faith that tells us that the world we see is intertwined with things not seen, and that God has spoken through the history and social order that have made us what we are. Without some such faith the transcendent vanishes from the world, and we are left with arbitrary contingency as the explanation of the things we care about, and the triumph of the will as the only standard of action.

Religious faith is already valuable simply as such. It establishes that we are

radically dependent on what lies beyond our understanding and control, and so imposes humility, the essence of conservatism and guardian of good sense. To give us definite guidance, however, religion must be particular. Both theory and appearances deceive, and the world includes horrors as well as treasures. Only a particular religion can guide us through the thicket, with the aid of standards that cannot be fully rationalized and practices and symbols that communicate meanings that cannot be spoken. A wisdom greater than our own is indispensable, and we inevitably accept something as such. Whatever we so accept becomes our religion.

We cannot choose a religion like a style of dress. Faith precedes our thoughts and actions, so we discover rather than choose it. In this connection, each of us must at some point speak for himself. None of us lack hints and presumptions upon which to build, and when we want the truth it is rarely far from us.

To find God most often means affirmation of the religious tradition in which we

already find ourselves. Nonetheless, God is not swallowed up by tradition any more than by reason. There are times in which traditions slip away, and it seems that we must start again from the beginning. We live in a time in which all inherited beliefs are called to account. Not every faith can be received in a world that has lost it or sustained in a world that insistently calls it into question. In faithless times the religion we need is one that grows out of its own denial. For me that religion can only be Christianity, the religion of God betrayed, abandoned, and crucified.

Those who try to get rid of Christ only reinvent him. Drive him out and he always returns. Why not grow up and accept his presence, and then accept that there is something trustworthy in how he has acted through his followers? That, after all, is the essence of conservatism, the persuasion that when all is said and done the indispensable knowledge is what we have always known and cannot help but know.

Religion, Conservatism, and Liberationism

Peter Augustine Lawler

IS CONSERVATISM necessarily grounded in religious faith? The answer depends, of course, on what is meant by both conservatism and religion. My charge is to make my answer personal, but I hope not too

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personal. I would not want to say that conservatives must be Catholics, much less think and believe as I do in every respect. So I am going to define conservatism for this occasion in an expansive way. And I am going to limit myself to saying that much of Christian psychology and portions of Christian faith must be true for me to be a conservative today,